

# JENNY AGUTTER

by John Brosnan

**W**hen he heard that I was going to interview the delightful Jenny Agutter, who was in town to help promote *An American Werewolf in London*, a friend of mine asked if I would get her to autograph a picture of herself for him. I agreed, a bit reluctantly, but for various reasons the photograph didn't reach me until *after* the day of the interview and when I saw it I was relieved it had because it was a shot of Ms Agutter from *Logan's Run* and it seemed to consist of nothing but an expanse of naked thigh. All very nice, to be sure, but I could just imagine myself producing this picture and mumbling, "Oh, by the way (cough), would you mind autographing this thigh... I mean photograph? It's not for me, it's for a thigh of mine... I mean friend..."

So I was very glad to have been spared the ordeal of making such a request, especially since she struck me as being a rather liberated and highly intelligent young woman who probably now disapproves of such cheese-cake style publicity shots. Her liberated leanings were brought home to me shortly after we arrived at the hotel for the interview when I overheard her and our own liberated photographer Joyce Agee animatedly discussing ERA (the Equal Rights Amendment which is, justifiably, a big issue among feminists in America these days). In fact, I was feeling so intimidated after that I even kept away from a subject I had intended to touch on during the interview—her attitude to doing nude scenes in movies (such as the one in *American Werewolf*). Oh well, some other thigh perhaps... I mean time...

Jenny Agutter has been working in the film industry for quite a long time now—since the age of 12, in fact, when she was chosen to star in a Disney picture called *Ballerina* (she had been trained as a ballet dancer from the age of 9, which explains those thighs...). That same year, 1964, she also appeared in *East of Sudan*, playing a little Arab girl, a movie produced by none other than Charles H. Schneer. Other movies and tv work followed but probably the most important role of her teenage years was in Nicolas Roeg's film *Walkabout* made in 1969. Then came *The Railway Children* in 1970 (she had earlier appeared in the tv version of the story) and a further succession of parts in British tv and stage plays until 1975 when she made her break-through into Hollywood with a starring role in *Logan's Run*.

Her choice of acting assignments since then has

been eclectic, ranging from a guest-starring role in *The Six Million Dollar Man* to playing Hedda Gabler on the London stage in 1980. Her film work has included *Equus*, which won her a BAFTA award in 1976, *Sweet William*, based on a Beryl Bainbridge novel, in 1978 and, most recently, *An American Werewolf in London* in which she played the nurse, Alex, who befriends (and beloved) the American protagonist.

So how did a nice English girl like her come to get mixed up with the likes of werewolves, rotting corpses and John Landis? "Well," she explained, "I'd known John for some time. A Los Angeles friend introduced me to him back when he was making *Kentucky Friend Movie* and he was always talking about this werewolf film he intended to make. He'd say to me, 'I want you in it!' but it never seemed as if it was going to happen. But then after *The Blues Brothers* he managed to get the project off the ground. I didn't get involved until November of 1980 when he'd got the money together and had a finished script for me to read. He'd described the story to me before but not in great detail and my feelings were: 'Well, it sounds rather weird to me...' Then I read it and I thought it was extremely funny and frightening though I also thought it was going to be extremely difficult to do without it becoming camp. But I knew John would probably be able to pull it off because he has such a great knowledge of film and a great enthusiasm for the horror genre—he knows every horror film that has ever been made—and he knows comedy. So I said, 'Yes, lovely... I'll do it!'"

I asked her about appearing in horror films in general. "It has to be something special like *American Werewolf* because generally they're not very rewarding roles. You can say that because horror films are usually commercial the actors get plenty of exposure but I don't think you really remember the people in horror films. Whereas in *American Werewolf* you do get quite involved with the characters and are disturbed by what happens to them as opposed to being merely shocked."

How did she personally feel about horror movies as a viewer? "I like good films of any sort. I don't like the gore that features in most horror films and I'm always surprised that people aren't more original in the way they make these films. It seems to me that there are always certain ingredients that just get thrown in

every time. And I certainly don't like films that victimise women, like *Halloween* and *Tattoo*... They're fighting because it is violence against women but it's sort of accepted by everyone. But *American Werewolf* definitely isn't that sort of film—the character I play is very capable and down-to-earth and she makes her own decisions about her life. And that's wonderful to see, not just in a horror film but any film. Even today with the Women's Movement and everything women in films are still usually portrayed as an ornament to the man, or as a Women's Libber type which gets boring—but never simply as a person getting down to a job or just being interesting in some way..."

After assuring Ms Agutter that I was a frequent campaigner for women's rights in the pages of *Starburst* I then asked if she had made many suggestions about the character of the nurse, Alex. "Not really because her character was very well-conceived in the finished screenplay and I was surprised because, of course, John isn't English. The only thing you might quarrel about is whether a nurse could afford to live in a flat like that on her own. But I was able to come to terms with that in my own mind after I went to a hospital for about a week to get the specifics right about doing things as a nurse. The one thing that was made very clear to me during that week was that nursing was obviously a vocation—nobody does it for the money because there hardly is any—and also that there are many different types among the nurses, ranging from cockneys to some who are frightfully posh. So I decided Alex was obviously from a well-off family who had bought her this big flat and helped her out financially. But the flat is big for English standards, I know, however you need a lot of space to film in..."

I asked her how long the shooting schedule had been. "It was actually rather reasonable. About 9 weeks—a good length of time for a film because it means you keep going and don't lose perspective of what you're doing. The rate of filming was about 2 minutes every day which is very good. The major problem we had was that it was all basically location shooting, much of it and around London and unlike American cities you don't get permission to shoot in London. All you get is: 'Okay, if you cause any hazards or stop traffic you'll be arrested,' as Esther Rantzen found out. So there was always the threat hanging









over us that John would be taken away and arrested in the middle of a scene. But we managed, and it was extraordinary really because a lot of the stuff was literally a case of jumping out of taxis and grabbing shots just as passers-by started to turn their heads to look at these crazy actors running up and down the streets screaming . . . then it was back into the taxis.

"The Piccadilly Circus sequence was very much a case of shooting on the run. John got the usual warning from the police about being arrested if he stopped the traffic but he told them he would do it without upsetting any traffic . . . and he did. The police were apparently very impressed with his methods. He shot it at 3 am in the morning and what he did was put some film unit cars in front of the traffic that went very slowly, creating a gap in the traffic flow. And by the time these cars reached the Circus the shooting had been completed . . .

"And we were very lucky with the Trafalgar Square sequence because usually the Square is crowded with people, especially on a Sunday which is when we shot there, however it happened to be pouring with rain—it absolutely poured—and nobody came out. This was very fortunate for us because we had this camera track all the way across from one corner of the Square to the other so it could all be done in one shot . . ."

Did she, I wondered, prefer working in England to America? "I'm always happy to be working here because I enjoy London and also the English film crews seem much closer in a way. But remember that really the only film I've made in America . . . **Logan's Run** for MGM and that was such a big production that you weren't involved with the crew in any way. You tend to get cut off in pictures that big. There were about 8 different sound stages being worked on at any one time and that went on for about 3 to 4 months and one tended to lose the idea of what it was we were making. We shot such tiny sections at a time—you came on and did your bit on some huge set and then went back to your dressing room and had a long wait until they were ready for you again. I wasn't exactly being stretched as an actress . . .

"On the other hand it was fun to work on such amazing sets and we got to play with a lot of mechanical toys and props like those little trains we rode around on, and it was fun filming in those futuristic buildings in Dallas and Fort Worth, though a lot of the time we were working with blue screens and having to react to wonderful scenery that wasn't there . . ."

Something that had puzzled me about **Logan's Run** was why two British stars had been chosen for the lead roles. "You may well ask. I think it was because the director, Michael Anderson, is English and was determined that Michael York should play the lead. He'd worked with Michael before and wanted someone who not only appears to be eternally young but also has stature as an actor. So having cast Michael he had to find someone who was right to play opposite him but an actress who was typically American would have clashed—not so much because of accents but because of acting styles—and I guess that's why I got the part. And there was Peter Ustinov as well—all of us Britishers ending up in Washington together . . ."

Mention of Michael Anderson reminded me that she had made another film with him—the Milton Subotsky horror movie **Dominique** in 1977. "Yes, I did it because I enjoy working with Michael. It was totally different to **Logan's Run**—it was shot very fast and involved only a small team as opposed to a giant crew. It was much more of an actors' film though, like **Logan's Run**, it was shot almost entirely in a studio—at Shepperton. I would describe it as a psychic thriller rather than a horror film but I'm not sure it worked. It didn't quite hold, in my opinion . . .

"Obviously with all films you go into them very enthusiastically, saying they're going to be great and everything but you never *really* know how they're going to work out and often during the editing, and the re-editing, they lose their way. For example, this movie I made in Australia last year called **The Survivor**—I no longer know what it's supposed to be about. When we were *making it* I knew very well what we were trying to make—like **Dominique** it was



Above: Jenny Agutter as Alex in *American Werewolf in London*. Below: Jenny Agutter with *American Werewolf* director John Landis.



supposed to be a psychic thriller. It was not quite a Gothic tale but it was a story about a plane crash and the events that take place afterwards. It was set up in such a way, though, that at the end of the picture you're not sure if the plane has crashed or is about to because it seems as if the whole thing is someone's premonition. I play a girl in it, who was in fact a *man* in the book, called Hobbs who is psychic. She is trying to sort out what it is that's gone wrong, which has something to do with the pilot who survived the crash. The trouble is that since I left Australia the ending has been re-edited so that it comes out differently. I haven't seen the completed picture so I don't know *how* it ends now. And I think they've had trouble releasing it . . ."

**The Survivor** was the second film she had made in Australia—the first being **Walkabout**—and I asked if she liked working there. "It's a funny thing about Australia—you either love it or you hate it, and I love it. I love it to the point of tending not to worry about the elements when I'm filming out there. And the elements are the biggest problem about filming in Australia because you can get caught in these extraordinary areas where you don't know whether it's going to rain or blaze with sunshine from one moment to the next. While making **Walkabout** we were shooting in Arnhem Land which is right up in the Northern Territories. It was coming into the monsoon season and if the rain had started it was very likely

the place would have flooded and we'd have been completely cut off. It's a very strange area . . .

"**Walkabout** involved a long shoot. We were in Australia for nearly 4 months, travelling all over the place and losing about 6 jeeps in the process. We only had a small unit and it was very hard work but I really fell in love with the country. It's so beautiful."

Deciding not to mention that I was a product of that beautiful country, so as not to shatter her illusions about the place, I then asked her about Nicholas Roeg, the director of **Walkabout**—"He's rather mysterious. I always see him as a magician figure, someone who can produce things out of thin air. He creates a working atmosphere that is different to any other director's. Looking back now to the filming of **Walkabout** it's difficult to determine when we were filming and when we weren't because it's all become merged into a single experience that I actually *lived* through . . ."

I asked if working with Roeg on the picture had taught her much as an actress. "In terms of film making it was an education, and I learned to be in touch *emotionally* with things more, but I didn't learn a great deal about acting craft. Remember I was only 16 when I did it so in a way I wasn't really aware of what it was Nic Roeg was making or how extraordinary it was. I just remember that he was a very enthusiastic gentleman . . . who I first met when I was 14. That was when he told me about this picture





Above: Jenny Agutter and David Naughton in one of the quieter moments in *American Werewolf*. Below left: The "thigh" still from *Logan's Run*. Below right: A portrait of Jenny Agutter.

he was going to make in Australia. Even then he was determined that he was going to make it. He's a very intense person. He demands total attention and total loyalty and you really do get caught up in it all and it becomes the most important thing in your life. And he doesn't accept any compromise when he's making his films—he intends to get exactly what he set out to make, whereas often in film making it doesn't work out as planned and you settle for second best, happy that at least you've got something on film, but he's extraordinary the way he gets what he wants. He really is like a magician pulling a rabbit out of the hat. His visual sense is wonderful and also his character observations are very real and honest . . ."

I asked if she remembered working on the Charles Schneer movie *East of Sudan* back when she was 12 years old. "Oh, yes. It was my first impression of a film studio and I thought it was absolutely wonderful. I got to throw rubber rocks around and act in front of the back projection screen . . . it was a very *cheap* movie. It was all about these people fleeing from the siege of Khartoum but it was shot entirely in the studio at Shepperton. The 'natives', who didn't have much to wear, were always freezing. I remember the director, Nathan Juran, saying, 'You look over here and you see a giraffe . . .' and he'd hold his *hat* up for the giraffe."

I mentioned that I'd been very impressed with her performance in *Sweet William*, which she made in 1978 with American actor Sam Waterston, and asked

if she'd been disappointed by the way the film had been received both critics and cinema audiences.

"Yes. Very. It got a better reaction when it was shown on tv than it did on its theatrical release. I was very disappointed because it was such a wonderful role for me and I really like Beryl Bainbridge's work. But nothing happened. It just came out and sank without a trace. I was also disappointed at the reaction to *Riddle of the Sands* (A WWI spy story co-starring Michael York made in 1978). I really thought that would work commercially and have the same sort of appeal as *The Railway Children*. It was a good adventure story and was beautifully shot but I don't know, perhaps it came out at the wrong time. Rank didn't seem to have much desire to sell it either, which didn't help . . ."

As she now lives a lot of the time in Los Angeles I asked if it was true that the English film industry people tend to stick together in Hollywood. "Not really. There are events where the English do congregate together and, of course, the media picks up on that. But on the whole I come across English film people as much as I do the American film people, which is usually just at screenings or whatever. I know Alan Parker painted a different picture recently—all the English expatriates playing cricket together and worrying about the state of the film industry and that sort of thing but I don't find it that

way. Of course everyone is worried about the industry at the moment. It's very, very bad. There is so little production going on right now. It's very peculiar."

Was it a handicap being an English actress in Hollywood, I asked. Did the Americans usually only choose her to play English characters? "Yes, a lot of the time but I *am* English and that is my way of expressing myself as an actress. I *have* played Americans but it's always difficult to convince producers and directors you can do it. I play an American in a Disney picture I did last year called *Amy*. It's set in Boston at the turn of the century and I play a young woman who teaches deaf children to lip read . . . and I played an American scientist once in an episode of *The Six Million Dollar Man* . . ."

I asked how that part had come about. "Well, it was in 1977 during the period when I was trying to get my Green Card and I couldn't leave America. I really couldn't do very much at all so when I was offered both the *Six Million Dollar* part and a tv special I considered them seriously. The script of the special was so much rubbish I couldn't believe it but the *Six Million Dollar* episode was a two-parter to start a new series and it seemed quite a good story. So I went along to meet the producers and they were very pleasant and appeared to care about the project so I agreed to do it . . ."

"It was my first experience at episodic television and *never* again. It was just terrible. I had the worst experience of my life on that. They just shot *anything*—nobody cared less what happened. If anything went wrong you'd have to plead to be allowed to do it again. The young man who was directing it, and I can't remember his name, was basically just a gofer and showed no care at all. He was just no good. We shot very fast—I think we did the two hours or whatever in just four weeks—and the script kept changing. It changed every week and I presumed they were carefully thought out changes so I would go up to him and say, 'You know the change that happened on page so and so?' And he would say, 'Change? What change? Has something been changed?' He had no idea what you were supposed to be doing and any questions about your character were a waste of time. All you'd get from him was, 'Well, I don't know about the characters . . . I'm just trying to shoot the thing . . .' Because it was a tv series with an established audience he couldn't care less about it, which was a shame because I think the producers really did care about what they were doing . . ."

But she worked on another American tv series after that—something called *Beulah Land* which I had to admit I'd never heard of, much less seen. "It was a sort of tatty *Gone With the Wind* but it did quite well, actually. The reviewers rather liked it. But it was a mini-series, not an ordinary tv series, and they spent a lot of time on it. It was more like doing a film so I didn't mind working on it. And the role I was offered was very unusual to the type of roles I usually get. She was a hooker and a rather interesting character to do . . ."

I asked if she tended to be typecast and if her role as an innocent young girl in *The Railway Children* continued to cast any shadow on her career even now. "One is always worried about being typecast because of the nature of the film industry and the fact that producers find it easier to keep you in a pigeon hole but I don't think *The Railway Children* affects my career now in any way. It is still remembered by a lot of people though, which is nice . . ."

And so the interview came to an end with me feeling relieved that it hadn't been marred by any of the embarrassing incidents that had been such a feature of my last interview with a celebrity (see the interview with Richard Donner in *Starburst* 35), but no sooner had I switched the tape recorder off and stood up to leave than I hit my head a resounding bang on a low-hanging metal lampshade. As I staggered about clutching my head I could see that Ms Agutter was torn between the desire to put into practice some of the skills she'd learnt while playing a nurse and collapsing into helpless mirth. She chose the latter course of action.

Always leave them laughing, that's my motto. ●